Book Club Kit

BERKLEY

Letter to book clubs

Dear Reader,

I've made a habit in my publishing career of pursuing the most outlandish premises I can conceive of with the assumption that at some point in the publishing process someone will stop me from actually writing or at the very least distributing said work.

In 2018, I thought, "Surely if I write a book about an art historian falling in love with her cinnamon roll porn star roommate, no one will publish it."

In 2019, I said, "Well, perhaps I was wrong once, but if I propose a sequel in which another porn star falls in love with a hot rabbi, someone will definitely stop me then."

Reader, for better or for worse, history shows that neither my professional partners nor my loved ones have yet found themselves inclined to intercede on my behalf. Thus, I find my craft as an author intractably entangled with the unceasing process of facing my fears. It is for that reason, among others, that I am proud to present my sophomore novel—the second seemingly impossible love story of my heart brought to print.

I thought I'd introduce you to *The Intimacy Experiment* through a story about its inception.

As you might know, I first wrote Naomi—a character whose original one-line summary was "the aptitude of Charlie's Angel Alex Munday with the disposition of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*'s Rosa Diaz"—as a core part of the narrative of *The Roommate*.

Biased as I am as her creator, I believe she deserves the world. So when considering her romance novel, I knew I wanted to match her with someone who would treat her the way she deserved, specifically in a way she had never quite managed to allow herself to be loved. I wanted to put into her path someone that Naomi would want enough to consider undertaking the effort of peeling off her infamous armor. I imagined Ethan Cohen as a man who would love her wholeheartedly, while still challenging her.

I am not kidding when I say that making him a hot rabbi immediately seemed to me the most logical solution. Despite my conviction, I harbored significant reservations about executing such a premise, so I decided to pitch the book first to my family.

Now for context, I have a relatively secular relationship with my Judaism, but my family is what I lovingly refer to as Big Jewish. I assumed they would say I absolutely could not write this book and then I would have an excuse to come up with something less challenging (if less intriguing). But here's how the conversation with my family went, pretty much verbatim:

ME: Hey, so I'd like to write a romance novel about a sex worker turned start-up CEO who falls in love with a rabbi. Would that be . . . cool?

FAMILY MEMBER: What?? Absolutely not. A rabbi would never enter into a relationship with someone who had been an adult performer.

ME: Okay, but hear me out, what if—

FAMILY MEMBER: I am emailing our rabbi.

ME: Whoa! Wait a second! I haven't even told you how it happens!

FAMILY MEMBER: *typing on phone* Too late.

RABBI, A FEW MINUTES LATER, VIA EMAIL: Who are we to stand in the way of love? P.S. It's easier if she's Jewish.

FAMILY MEMBER: Well. Hard to argue with that.

The more I write, the more I find my work tied to the ongoing examination of all the ways love can peel back our layers so that two people who shouldn't fit together on paper are revealed in such a way that you can't imagine them fitting with anyone but each other. There are certainly worse gigs. ☺

Thank you for taking a chance on this book. It matters most to me for all the ways it may appear unconventional.

Wishing you great love (on the page and off),

Rosie Danan

A Conversation with Rosie Danan

TELL US ABOUT *THE INTIMACY EXPERIMENT*! WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE THIS STORY?

Coming out of my twenties, I was very interested in the fact that there is no widely accepted guidebook for dating and relationships. Intimacy is fascinating to me as an age-old evolutionary craving that's constantly redefined by modern parameters and practices. Almost all of us seek intimacy in some form, whether for long-term monogamy or other forms of connection. Yet for the most part, we still have no idea how to find, keep, and lose it with any kind of grace. Navigating modern intimacy can be both profoundly beautiful and at times hilariously distressing.

When I thought about the characters of Naomi and Ethan—this jaded, incisive sex-ed start-up CEO and an earnest, charming Reform rabbi—they seemed like the kind of people who actually could write a syllabus and host a seminar series on the subject. Their pasts and personalities combine to produce this rare alchemy of perspective and expertise that felt (to me at least) widely valuable.

In writing the story, I enjoyed exploring Ethan and Naomi learning both from the work of building the course and from the experiences of testing their theories and finding out all the ways that even the best-laid plans can go wrong. Even from the beginning, it's not about them having all of the answers. It's about holding space and facilitating discussion while providing mutual support as they stumble through one of life's most meaningful endeavors.

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WHAT DO YOU FEEL ARE THE MAIN THEMES/ISSUES THAT ARE ADDRESSED IN *THE INTIMACY EXPERIMENT*?

Probably the biggest overarching theme is the exploration of modern communities. We see a lot of different group dynamics in *The Intimacy Experiment*. There are circles of friends, family, faith, work, and then of course there's the romantic relationship at the center between Naomi and Ethan. I was (and am) very interested in the intersections and divergency between those different communities, some we are born into and some we choose or create.

In the book, I examine what it looks like both to have access to community and what it's like to find oneself on the outside. Naomi's adult life is built around the belief that she doesn't belong in mainstream society and she relishes and weaponizes that part of her identity, using it to keep others at arm's length. Ethan created his own barriers within the core community of his youth when he decided to take on the responsibilities of being a rabbi.

While they both understand feeling divided from childhood cohorts and the hard work of finding your way back to those connections, they each also really care about building inclusive communities of their own—Shameless in Naomi's case and at Beth Elohim in Ethan's. They think of themselves as quite opposite in the beginning of the story, and in some ways they certainly are, but ideologically they're also very aligned. That discovery of shared values is a big part of what makes their relationship possible.

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DID THE BOOK REQUIRE ANY SPECIAL RESEARCH? IF SO, PLEASE PROVIDE ANY INTERESTING DETAILS ABOUT YOUR RESEARCH.

In order to write from the perspective of a rabbi, I knew I would have to gain a much deeper understanding of Jewish texts and their analysis than I had previously held. I'm very grateful that there are so many tremendous resources readily available for education in this regard.

I borrowed a ton of books by current and past rabbis, but probably my most frequently used tool was Sefaria.org. It's is a free online library of Jewish texts that's extremely interesting and easy to use. It has translations with commentary from different perspectives and it's all tagged so that you can seamlessly navigate through connected works.

HOW DID YOUR WRITING PROCESS CHANGE, IF AT ALL, WHILE WRITING THIS NOVEL?

The biggest difference in this writing process versus the one for my debut novel, *The Roommate*, was that I let my family read *The Intimacy Experiment* before it was published (frankly, if I had my way I would not have let them read *The Roommate* at all, but alas one cannot control wide, public distribution).

In all seriousness, as you may have read in my cover letter, I have had a very open dialogue with my family about this story and why I wanted to tell it in relation to our shared heritage across the

entire journey from inception to execution. It was very important to me that the book reflect experiences with Judaism and Jewish identity beyond my own, so I had a lot of Jewish beta readers including my aunt and cousin. At first, sharing my work with family members made me uneasy, but ultimately getting their feedback was super rewarding and even enriched the narrative in ways I couldn't have predicted.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE READERS WILL TAKE AWAY FROM THIS STORY?

At the very center of this story is an assertion about intimacy—not only acknowledgment of the challenges we face in exposing our vulnerabilities but also a celebration of the type of connection that blooms from that struggle—one that's as rewarding as it is terrifying, a true gift.

So many of us don't get enough opportunities to be soft, to understand that being needed and needing someone else isn't weakness but rather strength.

There is hard-won reflection in this book about how precious it is when you find someone who will take care with you, who will treat your heart tenderly. I'd be very honored if other people found meaning in that message.

"So many of us don't get enough opportunities to be soft, to understand that being needed and needing someone else isn't weakness but rather strength."

About Rosie

ROSIE DANAN writes steamy, bighearted books about the trials and triumphs of modern love. When not writing, she enjoys jogging slowly to fast music, petting other people's dogs, and competing against herself in rounds of *Chopped* using the miscellaneous ingredients occupying her fridge. As an American expat living in London, Rosie regularly finds herself borrowing slang that doesn't belong to her.

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Strike a Match

A Naomi Grant Playlist

FOR PEOPLE WHO KNOW BETTER AND FALL IN LOVE ANYWAY

"Man" • Neko Case

"The Steps" • Haim

"Portions for Foxes" • Rilo Kiley

"Fire" • Waxahatchee

"Don't Delete the Kisses" • Wolf Alice

"Dancing in the Dark" • Lucy Dacus

"Hit the Back" • King Princess

"So Hot You're Hurting My Feelings" Caroline Polachek

"New York" • St. Vincent

"Slow Burn" • Kacey Musgraves

"Kyoto" • Phoebe Bridgers

"Love Me Like I'm Not Made of Stone" Lykke Li

"Where Can I Go?" • Laura Marling

"circle the drain" • Soccer Mommy

"Under the Table" • Fiona Apple

"Video Games (Remastered)" Lana Del Rey

"Deceptacon" • Le Tigre

"Dig Me Out" • Sleater-Kinney

"California" • Joni Mitchell

"Closer to Fine" • Indigo Girls

"Where Does the Good Go" Tegan and Sara

"Come On" • Sunflower Bean

"Harvard" • Diet Cig

"Shark Smile" • Big Thief

"Simmer" • Hayley Williams

"When I'm with Him" • Empress Of

"How to Forgive" • Tennis

"Your Best American Girl" • Mitski

"Let It Die" • Feist

"Everybody Wants to Love You" Japanese Breakfast

"Love Again" • Dua Lipa

"Heart to Break" • Kim Petras

"Edge of Midnight (Midnight Sky Remix)" • Miley Cyrus

"Extraordinary Machine" • Fiona Apple

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3dzuLzvUiXg4184UE5sFUV?si=pHFNERf9SPaKj-MNUo_99w

Discussion Questions

1. A core theme of *The Intimacy Experiment* is the concept of personal identity and how we reconcile who we have been, who we are, and who we would like to become. Do you feel you have or have had multiple identities over the course of your lifetime? If yes, how do those roles intersect and/or challenge one another?

2. Naomi has made herself hard in response to the reception she's received from the world. Over the course of her relationship with Ethan, she works to make herself softer and more open. How does she go about this and what obstacles does she encounter? What benefits come from this exercise?

3. In his role as a rabbi, Ethan sets out to make ancient ideals accessible to modern audiences. What are some of the ways he goes about this? Did his reasoning and approach make sense to you?

4. Connecting with her Jewish heritage does not come easily to Naomi. Have you ever struggled with any kind of faith? Do you believe this is a worthy endeavor? Why or why not?

5. Naomi writes the syllabus for Modern Intimacy, but when she and Ethan try to test her hypotheses, they run into challenges. What did you observe from the ways their relationship went off track from the seminar's structure?

6. There are many different communities represented in this story: the inclusive sex education community built around Shameless, the Jewish community both at large and specifically at the two synagogues, the community of Naomi's former high school, and more micocommunities such as Naomi's and Ethan's friends and family circles. How do these "spaces" facilitate different kinds of belonging and acceptance for the characters in the novel?

7. From the way they dress to their personalities, Ethan and Naomi are opposites. How do their different worldviews lead to growth in each other? And what do you think their best qualities are? Have you ever dated someone who was your opposite?

8. Naomi and Ethan are both venturing into new professional territory with their modern intimacy seminars. When was the last time you had to go outside your comfort zone, and how did it help you grow professionally or personally?

9. Naomi's main takeaway from her lecture on breaking up is to practice self-care. What are your favorite things to do to practice self-care? Are any of her suggestions something you'd like to try?

10. Throughout the book, Naomi teaches a seminar on modern intimacy for Ethan's shul. Did her lectures make you realize anything new about your own ideas on modern intimacy? What do you wish more people knew about dating in today's world?